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To Build Our Lives Together: Community Formation In Black Atlanta, 1875-1906

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INTRODUCTION



The present study focuses, as its title indicates, on the positive evolution of a community of African Americans in Atlanta. My subject here is the long, slow, and painstaking process of interwoven personal and communal actions and interactions through which Black Atlantans successfully constructed a community from the ashes of slavery and the Civil War. Atlanta was manifestly a city of the New, rather than the Old, South. The nature of antebellum urban development, the special disorganization and displacement caused by the war, and the relocation of freedmen and -women to the Gate City meant that blacks in Atlanta were comparatively few in number, dispersed in location, and had little common history of municipal community as Reconstruction began. They were, therefore, forced to start fresh in their shared project of making a place and life for themselves in the relatively raw conditions of postwar Atlanta. Such conditions offer historians ideal circumstances in which to study the creation of a black community in freedom and the adverse reactions that such a community provoked in white southerners. The race riot that brought national attention to the city in 1906 was, in part, an attempt to destroy the gains made by Black Atlantans in the decades leading up to the violence. However tragic, the story of the riot should neither surpass nor erase the memory of earlier efforts of men and women to build new lives for themselves and their people. It is my intent here to commemorate the efforts of the members of the African American community in Atlanta to create conditions in which they might prosper rather than to emphasize yet again the drama of the race riot.

My study of the city argues that the culture, traditions, and survival mechanisms that African Americans developed in slavery played a significant role in the culture and community institutions they created in the post-Civil War period. Blacks exited slavery with a belief structure, an ideology, of race-based cooperation that was at the core of identity for the African American community in freedom. The shared past of the freedmen and -women included both the terrors of slavery *and* the solidarity of the slave quarters. The active racism of southern whites in particular and American racist thinking in general reinforced black notions of solidarity. What is more, given the fiscal reality of most African Americans, this ideology of intraracial cooperation, especially in the first three to four decades after the end of slavery, was not yet compromised by nascent intraracial class conflicts. Central to the physical and socioeconomic development of the black community in Atlanta, the ideology of racial solidarity became the foundation on which organizations and institutions would later be

built. African Americans had been enslaved as a race, and they understood that they must rise in freedom as a race.

This racial solidarity was not, however, immune to contemporary social and political discourse about the mission of "civilizing" the newly freed. Slavery's end had a progressive and increasingly disruptive impact on the community networks and worldview. Yet the values and traditions laid down in the slave quarters did not simply fall away with the chains of bondage. Instead, below the surface of dialogue about the "civilization" and cultural regeneration of freed people, mouthed by both black elites and white liberals, lay a fundamental belief in and dedication to racial solidarity. Blacks' commitment to the vote, to education, to fair wages, and to equitable treatment as citizens was tied to commitment to their communities and "the race" at large.¹

The goal of this study is to develop an understanding of the lives of black people who lived in the preeminent city of the New South in the first generation after the end of slavery. It addresses Black Atlantans' understanding of race, and the behavior stimulated and defined by it. This inquiry into the history of Atlanta's African American community, though not intended as the definitive treatment, does seek to suggest its richness and variety. I will emphasize here the core institutions of the community in Black Atlanta: the black churches, fraternal organizations, and social clubs that were at the forefront of the community's battle with a repressive southern society. The style and form of community organizations reveal both the structures of community evolution and something of the changing belief systems involved in the work of racial progress and uplift. Atlanta's black churches were centers of education, social services, and political activism for African Americans both during and after Reconstruction. As Robert McMath has observed, "Wherever Americans sought to establish ties of community in the nineteenth century, they built churches and Atlanta was no exception."² Fraternal organizations provided internal social welfare and support networks for the African American community, and simultaneously were sites of status competition and conflict. Social clubs and literary societies proved to be important locations for cultivating a new cultural ideology and new sets of social behaviors, especially among higher-status blacks.³

Only as we investigate the history of the community's formation, its growing size and strength, unity and relative independence, does a more complete picture of Black Atlanta emerge. Because Black Atlantans, routinely denied municipal services and benefits, access to financial institutions, and the rights of citizenship, had to do for themselves, they were partially able to elude some of the social controls imposed on blacks in less progressive communities. Consequently, their slight but increasing success as a community constituted an implicit threat to white power and authority, which provoked a violent reactionary

response. Race riot, the bigger, bolder second cousin to lynching, was a new violent form of racial control in the post-Civil War American South. Emancipation had deprived southern whites of slavery, their most effective method of repressive control over African Americans. Lynching, the highly sexual torture and murder of individual black men and women, had a chilling but somewhat fleeting effect upon black consciousness and behavior. Riots, as Joel Williamson has argued, were most often “preceded by a long period of agitation on the white side.” And, unlike lynching, “which singled out individual” blacks for maiming and murder, riot “broadened” the scope to allow more whites to extend violent control over “any and all blacks.”⁴ The violent outburst of riot was often resolved by the passage of repressive legal codes that provided white supremacist southerners with new tools with which to bludgeon African Americans. Atlanta was engulfed by this kind of violence for three days in the fall of 1906. The riot began in the downtown area and spread to encompass the black neighborhoods of Darktown and Brownsville. Black citizens experienced property destruction, physical terror, and murder at the hands of their white peers. Before the riot ended, at least twelve Atlantans were dead, hundreds of thousands of dollars’ worth of property had been destroyed, and seventeen units of the Georgia State militia—amounting to more than six hundred soldiers—had been assigned to the city.

The local, national, and international press was fascinated by the violence in Atlanta, a city previously heralded for progressive race relations. The media determined that the Atlanta race riot was a dramatic and spontaneous response to incidents of interracial rape perpetrated by black men against white women. Front-page stories of assaults against helpless white females appeared in the local newspapers, including the *Atlanta Constitution* and *Journal*. These stories so inflamed the passions of white men, or so it was argued, that rage overruled reason, and, sadly, violence had ensued. Yet in the rush to judgment, reporters and critics failed to unearth the deeper causes of the disturbance. Although the idea of rape, rumors of rape, and even actual rapes may have been the spark, they were not the fuel that fed the firestorm of the riot.

The Atlanta race riot was a product of a manufactured frenzy concerning black degeneration, “intemperance,” and crime that had been instigated in the 1880s and reinvigorated in the weeks preceding the riot by politicians, with considerable aid from the local press. More important, the riot was in large measure a visceral reaction on the part of the white population to the presence of a maturing black community with dynamic, forward-looking leadership. The existence of this African American community represented a multilayered challenge to the power white society possessed to maintain a racial status quo. As Tera Hunter has observed, “despite effective community mobilizations on many

fronts—indeed, because of their effect—blacks were increasingly met with systematic encroachments on their civil and human rights.”⁵ The historical record of the last quarter of the nineteenth century clearly indicates how, at every turn, white racial radicals led the charge to limit the kinds of gains blacks identified as essential to their own progress and development as citizens and members of a community.

Citizens of Black Atlanta worked to organize their lives to maximize their liberty through the pursuit of education, employment, religious life, and social activities. The creation of a viable black community was of paramount importance to survival and for “racial progress.” My use of the term “community,” however, should suggest neither consummate solidarity nor perfect consensus. African Americans in nineteenth-century Atlanta did not share a utopian communality based on either their class or their racial category. But freedmen and -women did cultivate a sense of community based on the shared circumstances of their lives: past enslavement, poverty, and, later in the period, institutionalized segregation. Of course, such descriptives may conjure up images of life as it might exist in a prison rather than in a society marked by the interconnected spaces of fraternal, familial, and financial relationships. And indeed, historians must be mindful of Clarence Walker’s admonition: “Community generated by oppression is no true community.”⁶ Still, African Americans in Atlanta sought to push beyond these shared negatives to create a viable community, and this work seeks to examine the ways in which they achieved this goal.

Community formation is a complex process. Communities are fixed and flexible, real and (as has been argued) “imagined,” spaces.⁷ “Fixed” categories, whether created by market forces, religious beliefs, sexual orientation, or national/racial ideologies, can generate lines of demarcation that outline potential communities. Such divisions are often reinforced externally by the beliefs, legal codes, and social customs of the external and dominant group. This partitioning is just one feature of community. Inside the lines, persons marked by gender, religion, or class create community while negotiating daily life in a shared space, with shared options and pleasures and often shared goals. This is the flexible facet of community. Human interaction—the development of patterns that become custom, common language styles, mutually remembered morality tales, and days of celebration—makes up the interior of community. The real and the imagined are the woof and warp of community, which is both an entity in and of itself and a site of opposition to other communities.

“Black Atlanta” refers here to a collection of black enclaves scattered across the city. Different enclaves might order the collective goals differently—lower-status blacks placing pursuit of viable employment above formal education,

propertied blacks placing moral reformation and political access above social activity. Nonetheless, like the interlocking pattern of a honeycomb, diverse segments of the black population in Atlanta were linked through shared cultural fraternity and racial solidarity, forming a larger community—each group a multisided unit, separate and discrete, yet also interdependent, creating a variegated and dynamic whole.

The concept of racial solidarity was at the heart of community for blacks in Atlanta. Slavery was a raced experience; that is, only people marked as black and nonwhite were enslaved. “Slavery,” as Eric Foner notes, “was a historical experience which would remain central to their [blacks’] conception of themselves and their place in history.”⁸ One must, therefore, come to the conclusion that one aspect of this conception was the development of a racial consciousness. Beyond their own internal awareness of themselves as raced, freedmen and -women understood that they were identified in the census, the newspapers, the courts, and tax records by race. They were distinguished from other citizens by the notation “negro,” “colored,” or “black” next to their names. Yet to say that African Americans organized and worked together because of their race is not to credit some biological factor dependent upon the melanin in their skin. Race in the context of this work refers to something more than physical makeup. Geneticists have discredited the concept of race as a biological determinant and physical marker, which is the way it was used in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁹ Similarly, social scientists, historians, and literary critics have challenged as fallacy the biological notion of race. Historian Barbara J. Fields, for example, has noted that those who continue “to believe in race as a physical attribute of individuals . . . might as well also believe that Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny and the tooth fairy are real and that the earth stands still while the sun moves.”¹⁰

Although scholars no longer adhere to a concept of race as biological and “natural,” it does not follow that concepts of race are invalid or without meaning. Race is “real” inasmuch as people attach meaning to the term, interpret the world around them through that meaning, and are motivated to action in relation to that interpretation. “Social constructions of identity,” be they rooted in gender, class, or race, assume that human beings create meaning around a given point of identity. And nineteenth-century Americans did indeed attach specific meanings to racial difference—to blackness in particular.¹¹ White intellectuals, politicians, ministers, and businessmen rooted their evaluation of intelligence, of who should have access to the rights of citizenship, of who possessed a soul or deserved equal treatment in the marketplace using a construct of racial hierarchy. White Americans defined themselves in part through their racial ranking,

which was at the top. African Americans, who had just escaped racebound slavery and lived in a racist society, attached meaning and value to their racial selves.

The challenge, then, is to develop a working definition of race that avoids the criticism that it is "transhistorical." For my purposes, "race" refers to the combination of complexion, culture, and ancestry by which individuals and communities define themselves and, consequently, others. In accordance with Walker's comment that the "unifying factor in the aggregate experience of nineteenth-century Americans is race," I argue that African Americans (and other Americans) in the late nineteenth century understood themselves to be members of a race. Referring to themselves as "African," "Black," "Colored," or "Negro," these people believed that as individuals they belonged to an interconnected racial group. Race in this construct was as powerful an entity and as motivating a factor as class consciousness or gender identification. Indeed, race conditioned class and gender relations both internal and external to the group.¹²

The survival and success of the race as a whole was crucial to individual African Americans at the end of slavery and well into the twentieth century. The concept of "uplift" addressed in recent studies of African American history reflects this vision. Some of the best scholarship on the subject has both emphasized the "middle-class" origins of the concept of uplift and problematized the core premise of it. Kevin Gaines's work, *Uplifting the Race*, reveals the intellectual tightrope walked by black elites and other uplift workers who understood the challenge of advocating moral and social reform for the "lower classes" while championing basic human rights for all blacks within a racist society. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham has offered an important analysis of the complex negotiations carried out by Baptist women in their pursuit of racial justice and reform from within a construct of "respectability." Higginbotham's *Righteous Discontent* has had a significant impact upon my study of Black Atlanta. Her concept of the "politics of respectability," so essential to the struggle for equal access within the dynamic of race relations in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, features prominently in my discussion of high-status blacks in the city. If, as William H. Chafe has argued in his discussion of the Civil Rights movement in Greensboro, North Carolina, progressive race relations were marked on the white side by the "culture of civility," then the politics of respectability identified by Brooks Higginbotham is the necessary corollary on the black side.¹³

Glenda Gilmore's study of gender and politics in North Carolina and Stephanie Shaw's pioneering study of black professional women have also helped scholars discern the interwoven and sometimes conflicting patterns of the work of race uplift in the era of Jim Crow. Like Brooks Higginbotham, Gilmore, with whom I share an understanding of black "communitarianism" in the post-Civil

War era, stresses the dual nature of black women's uplift efforts. While black elite women understood themselves to be of a higher class than women of the masses and worried that "uneducated women" were "dangerously unprepared" to communicate proper racial politics, they also understood that it was their duty to uplift their poorer sisters for the benefit of the race. Stephanie Shaw also analyzes the concept of uplift. More important, she offers scholars a guide designed to help us retrace the process of indoctrination through which young black women came to understand that they must prioritize race over "ego-tism." Black institutions of higher learning, argues Shaw, simply layered lessons about "community responsibilities" over "earlier socialization in homes." Black women professionals could not escape an understanding that their own status and success in life were firmly attached to the fate of the race as a whole.¹⁴

There are, however, dangers implicit in the construct of uplift work. Analyses emphasizing the elite origins of the ideology tend to be importing back into time a certain present-day spin on the gulf between the "black middle class" and the "permanent underclass" of the inner city.¹⁵ Discussion of this gulf today—rooted in philosophizing about the causes of poverty and drawing upon urban sociology and heavy doses of media hyperbole—often obscures the real historical and familial links between the human beings in these categories. Thus the much ballyhooed African American who has risen to prominence by way of the middle-class traditions of clean living, self-restraint, and hard work frequently has brothers, sisters, cousins, and friends who have not. Let us consider, for example, the visits of relatives who have "attained" the middle-class status of residency in affluent Prince George's County to mothers and cousins in inner-city Baltimore. In earlier decades, residents of Atlanta's "elite" Brownsville neighborhood undoubtedly experienced a similar angst upon visiting family and friends across the city in Darktown or in rural DeKalb or Fulton County. Such intimate family connections challenge more clinical notions of divisions within the black community. As historian Earl Lewis has noted, "class in the black community must be viewed as part of an intraracial discourse. Oftentimes, a middle-class existence hinged upon the community's agreement; as a consequence, most middle-class blacks lacked the luxury of removing themselves from their working-class relatives and neighbors."¹⁶ In positing a more or less complete separation between middle- and lower-class blacks, the scholarship on racial uplift also tends to discount the impact of extended family networks on the black community's concept of racial solidarity. The title of Don Wallis's oral history of a black community in a twentieth-century midwestern town, *All We Had Was Each Other*, captures the essence of such feeling.

African Americans in Black Atlanta, whose memories of the trials of slavery and the betrayals of Reconstruction were fresh, shared such a sentiment.¹⁷ Their

experiences were not uniform and their solidarity was not perfect, but most Black Atlantans enjoyed both a common history of survival and common hopes for the future. The experiences of working in concert to gain access to education for themselves and their children, combining efforts toward material and "moral" progress for the race, and participating in social events (from attending lectures held at the Odd Fellows Hall to gathering in Darktown dives) created and defined community for black residents in Atlanta. This was a racial community to be protected from attacks from without and nurtured from within.

The material circumstances of the vast majority of freedmen and -women in Atlanta in the era of Reconstruction and immediately beyond do not reveal differences in economic position or education and values that would support the premise of intraracial class conflict. Upon the abolition of slavery the percentage of African Americans across the South who owned land, substantial livestock, or other "means of production" that might elevate their position was minute.¹⁸ The vast majority owned only their skills as agricultural laborers, and for the first time they owned themselves and their progeny. Similarly, the percentage of the roughly four million freedmen and -women who were well educated or even literate was tiny. Hundreds of thousands sought education in the postwar period. They flocked to schools sponsored by aid societies or religious organizations, yet most were unable to secure basic schooling let alone advanced degrees. In truth, the lives of most freedmen and -women were not transformed by the core curriculum that dished out moral regeneration along with "readin'," "ritin'," and "'rithmetic." Scholars must investigate how these structural factors—general poverty and lack of education—may have mitigated class aspirations and divisions within the black community in the immediate postwar era. Most African Americans, especially those who resided in the agricultural South, found that their reality was marked more by class similarity than by difference.

Formerly "free people of color" who had had access to education and economic advancement during slavery were concentrated in a few areas of the South. These southern "aristocrats of color," including mulattos and quadroons, who resided in major urban centers such as Charleston, South Carolina, and New Orleans, Louisiana, often assumed positions of leadership within the black community in the postwar period. They developed political relationships with influential white patrons and supposedly wielded power in closed "Brown Fellowship" societies.¹⁹ Representing a small portion of the African American community, however, they were more the exception than the rule. Not all mixed-race children of the antebellum period could claim the status of free persons. Most whites who had fathered children by slave women main-

tained them in bondage rather than freeing them and providing them with an education or trade. Nor could all of those who were free depend upon "kinship networks" with affluent whites. Many free people of color were neither affluent nor well educated and found themselves living closer to the margins of slave society than white.²⁰ Those who were lettered and prosperous might draw lines of distinction that set them apart from their darker peers, but most had few options in the face of the stronger black/white color line except to act as members of the black community.²¹

More important, in the southern cities that blossomed following the Civil War—Atlanta, Memphis, Little Rock—there had been far fewer free people of color in the antebellum years than in cities of the Old South such as Charleston or New Orleans. Atlanta's free black population had not, in the antebellum era, developed an extensive social network or political base. Only one of the ministers who would become a political influence in Black Atlanta had already put down roots in the prewar years.²² Many of the men and women who became leaders in the postwar community had been slaves with no formal education and certainly no background or experiences that would mark them as middle class.²³ In Atlanta, much of the rhetoric of uplift came from academics and social activists whose commitment to their race demanded a commitment to progress and success irrespective of their working-class origins.

I argue that social status rather than class in a strictly economic sense was the basis of stratification in the late nineteenth century. The vast majority of Black Atlantans between 1875 and 1906 should be classified as working class. It was a population that lived by daily labor rather than on "property income" or "as creditors in loan relationships."²⁴ Within this larger working-class category, African Americans affiliated with one another on the basis of "a common mode of life and . . . code of behavior."²⁵ The presence or absence of similar educational backgrounds, religious beliefs, club memberships, and political ideologies determined which Black Atlantans belonged to which status groups within the larger African American community. Status ranking determined Black Atlanta's "best," "rising," and "poor," whether or not the external white community recognized such differences.

The marginal gradations in wealth in early postwar Black Atlanta had increased by the twentieth century. The first two decades of the new century witnessed the development of a small black middle class in Atlanta. The development of this twentieth-century middle class was linked to the pursuit of higher social status, and it grew out of the diverse status affiliations already present in the nineteenth century. Historians, as noted by sociologist Randall Collins, may have misinterpreted Max Weber's theory of social stratification, placing status

and class erroneously in opposition. "Status groups are not the antithesis of economic class but precisely the way in which stratified classes are able to emerge and maintain themselves. It is through the organization of status groups that classes become distinctive entities in the market, instead of parts of the endless . . . flux of labor with the tides of supply and demand."²⁶

The status groups that developed in Black Atlanta in the post-Civil War period laid the groundwork for business successes in the African American community at the end of the nineteenth century. These successes in turn produced greater gradations in wealth and greater diversity of lifestyle, including increased access to higher education. These lifestyle changes, though always constrained by white racism, stimulated changes in black employment, in the development of financial institutions, and in business investment, and slowly a portion of the black community moved out of the working class and into the middle and upper classes.

Fraternal orders are an excellent example of this process; they provided both social services and status elevation for many black males in Atlanta during this period. Early-twentieth-century black insurance firms in Atlanta (and elsewhere) did not build their businesses from the top down. Rather, they bought out the insurance programs originally run by fraternal and church groups. Thus, the insurance programs of these fraternal orders were the basis for the development of a highly successful private insurance firm, the Atlanta Life Insurance Company, shortly after the turn of the century. Once their fraternal or church groups' insurance programs were bought out by private insurance companies, blacks in Atlanta continued to pay for group insurance from an entity run by and for African Americans. However, they now purchased a policy from a black insurance agent who was generating profit for a group of black middle-class stockholders. Black entrepreneurs appropriated the monopoly that fraternal and church groups had had on insurance within the black community. They quite literally capitalized upon the market created by status groups. The banking and real estate industries would similarly become linked in the African American community. The pursuit of status and the presence of status groups were therefore essential to the eventual development of Atlanta's black middle class.²⁷

Status competition best describes the economic conflicts in the black community in post-Civil War Atlanta, but this status-seeking behavior had an additional component. The activities and rituals of the fraternal orders, the benevolent societies attached to black churches, and the social clubs connected with Atlanta's black colleges were not only mechanisms of stratification, but also new places for the creation of community and validation of culture. Much of the writing of historians of slavery has, since 1970, emphasized the ways in

which enslaved African Americans nurtured a culture and ideology.²⁸ Enslaved Americans had their own worldview(s), their own internal set of values and beliefs that sustained them in the face of violence and oppression. Slave culture placed great emphasis upon extended and fictive kin networks; it encouraged group decision-making and community solidarity. Brenda Stevenson's recent work on slavery, for example, stresses the distinctiveness of the slave family and marriage patterns, as well as the development of a "community ethos" marked by an emphasis upon a "responsibility to help others."²⁹ Whittington B. Johnson's *Black Savannah* challenges traditional ideas about Savannah's race relations and details the efforts of that city's blacks to build and maintain community rooted in the black church. The ideology of slaves was not just a source of mutual support for blacks; it also encouraged them to see whites as untrustworthy and dangerous. Both Wilma King and Norrece Jones have written studies of slavery that question the romantic vision of paternalistic relations between masters and slaves by recasting the slave experience as one of a perpetual war in which blacks viewed whites as enemy "others" who posed a threat to the health of their community.³⁰

The study that follows will similarly focus on African American initiative and social development within the black community. The first chapter of the text details black life in antebellum up-country Georgia. Newly born in the 1830s, Atlanta bore little resemblance to far older southern cities, a circumstance that significantly affected the formation of black community in it. Chapter 2 focuses on the reconstruction of the city in Sherman's wake and black efforts to embrace freedom. The story of the American Civil War in Atlanta is not retold in these pages. Rather, the purpose of this chapter is to focus the discussion on community growth and development over time. Chapter 3 chronicles the establishment of a separate and diverse black church life in the city and seeks to uncover the social theology of the churches as transmitted through church records and ministerial commentary. The analysis in chapter 4 of the battle for education shifts the focus from inside the African American community to one of the most contested spaces of black-white relations. Chapter 5 examines the activities of a sample of community associations with an eye toward understanding the social and civic activities of Black Atlantans of high and middling status. Chapter 6 analyzes political retrenchment in the state of Georgia and the city itself. The focus is on the way race figured in the prohibition battles of the 1880s and on African American efforts to claim and defend their rights of citizenship. Lastly, chapter 7 addresses the riot, specifically interpreting the violent attack on black lives, property, and rising social aspirations as something best understood within the context of a regional movement to disfranchise and otherwise politically restrain black voters.